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Signing Off: Paul Klee's '*Insula dulcamara*'¹

Chris Pike²

'A man's life, unique as his death, will always be more than a paradigm and something other than a symbol. And this is precisely what a proper name should always name.'

- Jacques Derrida¹

Abstract

Paul Klee's painting *Insula dulcamara* (1938) has been the focus of numerous reviews and analyses in academic and popular literature on the artist over a period of many years. However, most such readings fall short of a comprehensive interpretation of the composition *as a whole*, and assume – implicitly or otherwise – that the painting's black markings are not readable as 'writing' in any linguistic sense. By contrast, this paper offers a novel analysis of the painting's 'way to form' grounded in Klee's writings on his own compositional practices, biography, and approach to meaning-making, and in so doing demonstrates a compelling perceptual *gestalt* in which the painting's black markings are configured as a graphical abstraction of the name 'Paul Klee'; the configuration as a whole constituting the artist's *signature*. This signature is taken as the prototypical basis for a plausible reconstruction of the composition's 'way to form' via Klee's unfolding thematic meditation on life, death and identity. The paper explores some implications of this analysis for the long-standing debate over authorial intention versus potential signification as valid bases for interpretation in art and literature. Exploiting the thematic coincidence of authorial death and signature in both *Insula dulcamara* and the writings of Jacques Derrida, it is suggested that the painting may be seen as iconographically exemplifying – if not actually resolving – issues at the heart of the notorious 'Death of the Author' debate that dominated late twentieth century critical discourse.

Key words: Paul Klee; *Insula dulcamara*; Signature; Intention

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[FIGURE 1 – Paul Klee, *Insula dulcamara*, 1938, 481; oil and coloured paste on paper on burlap; original frame, 88 x 176 cm; Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

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Introduction

Paul Klee's painting *Insula dulcamara* (1938) (figure 1) has been the focus of numerous reviews and analyses in academic and popular literature on the artist over a period of many years.² However, most such readings fall short of a comprehensive interpretation of the composition *as a whole*. While isolated elements of the painting are often seen as alluding to Klee's illness and approaching death at the time of its production, his trip to Tunisia in 1914, and/or to particular organic forms and motifs, such interpretations are partial and rarely grounded in Klee's writings and reflections on his own compositional practices and phenomenological investigations of the creative process.³ In his notebooks and numerous artworks, Klee records, analyses, and explores how the generative dynamic, or 'law', inherent in an emerging composition unfolds moment-by-moment through the interdependent activity of formal organisation, subjective association, and the artist's 'active 'I'', rendering his works self-referential products of the artist's conscious, self-reflexive engagement in the process by which they come into being; works that both articulate and comment upon (often ironically) the intentional activity involved in their own creation.⁴ To read a painting by Klee in this way (as he himself invited his students to do) is to imaginatively reconstruct, or rediscover, the process by which it came into being, since for Klee 'the way to form, dictated ... by some inner or outer necessity ... determines the conclusive or concluded character of the work'.⁵

In this paper, I show how adopting this approach to a formal analysis of *Insula dulcamara* leads to a compelling perceptual gestalt in which the painting's black script-like markings are configured as a graphical abstraction of the name 'Paul Klee', the configuration as a whole constituting the artist's *signature*; a connection which, as far as I am aware, has not been made before in the extant literature on Klee. I then show, again in dialogue with Klee's writings, how this signature provides the prototypical basis for a plausible reconstruction of the composition's 'way to form' in terms of an unfolding thematic meditation on life, death and identity. Finally, I explore some implications of this analysis for the long-standing debate over authorial intention versus potential signification as valid bases for interpretation in art and literature. Exploiting the remarkable thematic coincidence of authorial death and signature in both *Insula dulcamara* and the writings of Jacques Derrida, I suggest the painting may be seen as iconographically exemplifying – if not actually resolving - issues at the heart of the notorious 'Death of the Author' debate that dominated late twentieth century critical discourse.

Signature as Prototype

Insula Dulcamara is one of several palimpsestic works produced by Klee in 1938, in which black script-like markings are overlaid on newspaper print as the base text. A palimpsest is a document or artefact created by the layering of one text upon a prior text, the latter being either completely erased by or partially visible through the uppermost layer,⁶ which in the case of *Insula Dulcamara* has been turned on its side and mounted on burlap. Inspection of the surface shows Klee to have first sketched out the 'pictorial writing' on the paper with brown crayon (most likely before mounting onto burlap), and then drawn over it with thick black paste *before* applying paint to the surrounding area. This is evident from narrow strips of untouched newspaper around

the black paste, the surrounding contours of oil paint, and the fact that in contrast to the flat, unaltered paper-base of the markings, the once-wet painted area is imprinted with the fine criss-crossed texture of the underlying hessian. The painted area itself is built up from a light ground overlaid with patches of thin colour, onto which are painted various motifs and numerous individual brushstrokes of pure white paint, particularly within and around the central 'P' figure. This chronology maps directly onto Klee's written accounts of his own compositional process, suggesting the 'ground' and motifs of the painting to be later thematic developments of the black markings - and possibly the underlying newspaper print - as original prototypical material, and as such provides a useful basis for an analysis, or reconstruction, of the painting's 'way to form'.

In his notebooks, Klee describes the process of interpreting an abstract painting as an attempt at discovering its underlying prototype:

'In certain pictures you can interpret one thing or another in relation to its form, or prototype. Sometimes the things are far removed from the prototype. So many steps have been taken in converting the experience. Often, on the other hand, there is more unity ... Or two tendencies appear, the one more, the other less exact ... This produces a character, a certain reconstruction of the prototype ... Sometimes we can distinguish the parts quite easily, sometimes with greater difficulty, and sometimes not at all ... [But] even in the most abstract pictures we can detect the thread of connection with the prototype. To be sure, one needs a special kind of experience to be able to appreciate this. Sometimes you can guess the prototype of an abstraction at a glance, but sometimes the connection is more circuitous and ceases to be discernible.'⁷

In what follows, I suggest that the underlying prototype of *Insula dulcamara* is in fact Paul Klee's name, or signature. As is well-known, Klee had a life-long interest in the ambiguous boundaries and relationships between handwriting, drawing, calligraphy, and musical notation, and the signature as an archetypal form of 'pictorial writing' provides ideal material for investigatory abstraction and unification of such elements. It would not be surprising, therefore, if not only had he used his own name as a formal starting point for at least some of his abstract compositions, but had also used its articulation in various known calligraphic or typographic scripts as initial working material. Given the notable affinity of markings in *Insula dulcamara* with Islamic calligraphy, then, it is useful to note that an approximate transliteration of the name 'Paul Klee' in Arabic reads (right to left):⁸

پُلْ كُلِي

To date, however, while similarities between Klee's 'pictorial writing', handwriting and calligraphy have been noted, it has generally been assumed that the markings themselves are not readable as 'writing' in any linguistic sense.⁹ Yet while those in *Insula dulcamara* certainly exhibit the 'two tendencies' referred to by Klee himself - 'the one more, the other less exact' – as we shall see, their connection with the prototype is clearly discernible.¹⁰



[FIGURE 2 - Detail from *Insula dulcamara* showing 'origin' or 'key' sign.]

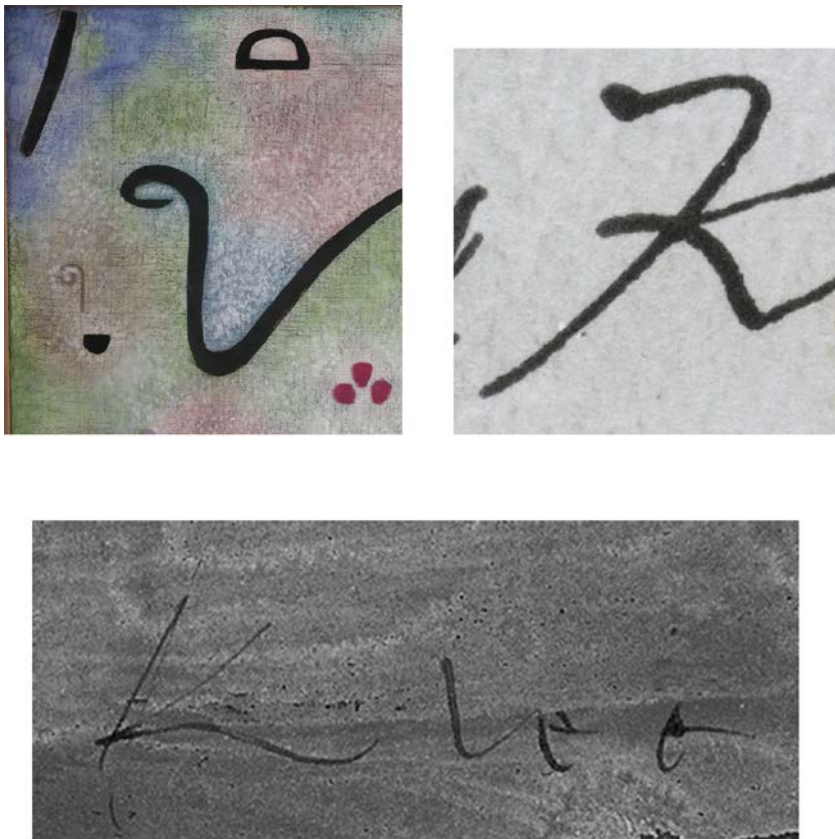
The key to reading the overall configuration is given by a 'sign' to the centre-left of the painting (figure 2), the central black dot of which by virtue of its form and location within the overall design self-referentially draws attention to itself as the point of origin around which the composition revolves. As with other directional signs such as the arrow, its structure provokes the movement that the sign itself represents, leading the viewer's eye, as Klee put it, 'like a grazing beast' along 'paths ... laid out' for it within the picture plane.¹¹ In this way, the lower and upper curved lines mark out anti-clockwise 'paths' through the abstracted names 'Paul' and 'Klee', respectively. As noted, in line with Klee's observation of the 'two tendencies' at work in abstraction, and his aesthetic need to balance these and other opposing forces in the picture plane, the first name appears 'more exact' in relation to the prototype and the surname noticeably 'less' so. Nevertheless, in both cases the thread is there; while the lower path self-evidently takes the viewer's eye through the letters 'P', 'a', 'u' and 'L' (figures 3(a)-3(d)), the upper path, more obscurely, takes it through 'K', 'L' and /ee/.



[FIGURE 3 - Details from *Insula dulcamara* showing letters of the name 'Paul']

The path through the surname begins with the letter 'K' (figure 4a) formed by a conjunction of the straight diagonal line that cuts across the top left-hand corner of the painting and the long horizontal tail-line of the 'L' in figure 3d. There are two potential

sources for this configuration in terms of stroke and gesture. Firstly, it is clearly reminiscent of the 'K' in Klee's handwritten autographic signature (figure 4b), particularly as it appears on another work painted shortly afterwards, *Ernste Mein* (1939) (figure 4c; figure 10), with which *Insula dulcamara* is thematically connected. As can be seen, the diagonal corner line matches the downward stroke of the letter's main stem, while the hook-tailed horizontal line (its initial handwritten stroke absent, but implicit in the finely tapered beginning) matches the letter's arms. Secondly, the configuration as a whole is a simple transformation of initial-position /k/ (on the right) in the Arabic transliteration of Klee's surname:¹² كُلي



[FIGURE 4 - Similarity between markings in *Insula dulcamara* and the 'K' in Klee's signature; (a) detail from *Insula dulcamara*; (b) detail of Klee's handwritten signature; (c) detail from *Ernste Mein* showing Klee's signature.]

Moving down the anticlockwise path from the 'K' brings the eye to a capital 'L' in the bottom left-hand corner (figure 5), itself identical to that in Klee's capitalised form of autographic signature as appears on works such as *Senecio* ('Old Man') (1922). Interestingly, this mark – as mirror-image – also resembles the solitary form of /k/ in Arabic script, ك , suggesting the possibility of another composite 'K-L' sign.



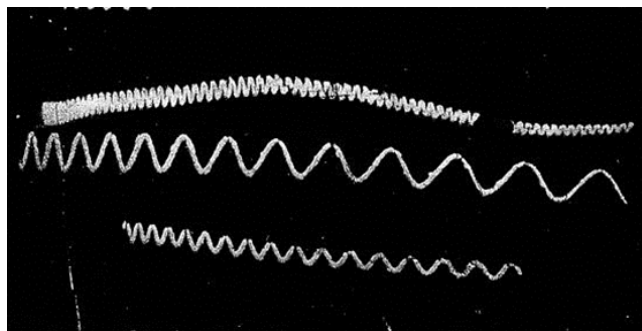
[FIGURE 5 - Detail from *Insula dulcamara* showing capital 'L'.]

This then leads directly into what is perhaps the most abstract element of all; a representation of the *sound* /ee/, as articulated by an undulating line reminiscent both of Arabic script and a sonic waveform (figure 6). Klee's notebooks contain several worked examples of attempts at creating linear representations or graphical equivalences of phonological elements and musical phrases, many of which, as Sara Lynn Henry shows, are strikingly reminiscent of the 'linear tone writing' produced by then-contemporary scientific instruments with which Klee would have been familiar.¹³ One of these machines mechanically transcribed the vibrations of a tuning fork, the linear output of which closely matches the waveform in figure 6. Klee is almost certain to have experimented with direct methods of 'tone writing' (or what might equally well be termed 'vibrational drawing') in his school physics classes, such as moving a needle attached to a vibrating tuning fork across a blackened glass plate (figure 7),¹⁴ and as K. Porter Aichele has shown, Klee's active interest in the science of his time led him to

incorporate then-influential ideas about energy into his drawing style and use of line.¹⁵ Klee himself records his excitement at manual drawing with a needle on blackened glass in his diaries.¹⁶ Aside from its energetic qualities, however, and while alluding to the diacritic modification of vowel sounds in various languages (including German), as with the /k/ configuration above, the line in figure 6 with its two adjacent 'dots' is also markedly similar to the equivalent representation of the long vowel /ee/ by the Arabic letter ي in Klee's transliterated surname: كُلي



[FIGURE 6 - Detail from *Insula dulcamara* showing articulation of the sound /ee/ in Klee's surname.]



[FIGURE 7 - Examples of linear tone writing on carbonised glass plate produced by needle attached to a tuning fork. ©Klaus-Dieter Keller, 2011 (Publicly available)]

The signatory quality of the configuration as a whole is accented by a paraph-like flourish on the right-hand side (figure 8) and a 'stop' in the lower right-hand corner. The flourish also echoes the /ee/ line in the bottom left-hand corner, such that given its position relative to the 'L' in 'Paul' and the fact that - as seen - this 'L' is co-extensive

with the 'K' both in Klee's handwritten signature and in his surname's transliteration into Arabic script, a second 'Klee' may also be read across the work from left to right.¹⁷ Indeed, the 'K-L' configuration here is essentially a topologically equivalent mirror-image of the transliterated form, كُل , with the 'L's – as that in پُل , 'Paul' - being more-or-less identical.



[FIGURE 8 - Detail from *Insula dulcamara* showing 'paraph' line.]

This additional tendency to read from left to right is further strengthened by three markings along the top edge of the picture depicting a 'steamer' moving from a 'rising' upright light semicircle towards a 'sinking' inverted black semicircle; a configuration giving the otherwise purely spatial composition an important temporal dimension, as discussed in more detail below.¹⁸ More specifically, however, given its position relative to the long vertical line below-right and the adjacent 'flourish' (figure 8), it is possible to read the 'steamer' itself as a pictorial elaboration of the maddah, an Arabic diacritic indicating a glottal stop and elongation of the /a:/ on the letter aleph, itself consisting of a single vertical down stroke. As such, the steamer-vertical-flourish configuration closely resembles the Arabic letter grouping, Q-R-A, قُرَأَ, originally meaning 'to recite' or 'proclaim', and later by extension 'to read'.¹⁹ Given Klee's choice of newspaper as a base, then, it is interesting to note that the German word 'Zeitung'

(like English 'tiding') is likewise etymologically linked with 'announcement' or 'proclamation'.

Reference to reading also invites consideration of the Arabic term for 'writing' as possible additional source material for the markings in *Insula Dulcamara*. Interestingly, the Arabic word for 'writing', or 'book', كِتَاب ('kitab'), is closely related to that meaning 'to draw, or sew together',²⁰ and not only has elements in common with Klee's transliterated surname, but also contains the letter ب, itself remarkably similar to the mark denoting 'U' in 'Paul' (figure 3c) together with its short black line immediately below. As we shall see in the next section, references to both قُرَأ and كِتَاب are strengthened by Klee's subsequent use of a serendipitous opportunity afforded by the palimpsestic structure of the work.

Finally, in accordance with Klee's theory of pictorial mechanics,²¹ that is the perceptual effects of virtual gravity and motion in the picture plane, the black vertical lines in *Insula dulcamara* also provide an important structuration function in the overall configuration by marking key structural-prosodic locations associated with the vowel sounds in Klee's name.²² However, they do more than this. The line in the lower right-hand corner also serves an important 'balancing' function within the formal composition as a whole (as can be experienced if temporarily occluded), as a result of which it appears to 'support' the 'U' above it. The latter by association can then be seen, and felt, as a scales pan,²³ with its sense of 'weight' further accentuated by the black inverted semi-circle in the upper right-hand corner. (Klee makes frequent use of scale motifs in explaining his theory of pictorial mechanics). This configuration and its accompanying sense of 'weight' is also indicated by the lower anti-clockwise line of the 'key' sign to the centre-left (figure 2), its upper line indicating a counter-balancing function performed by the long horizontal K-L line, which by virtue of its overall shape

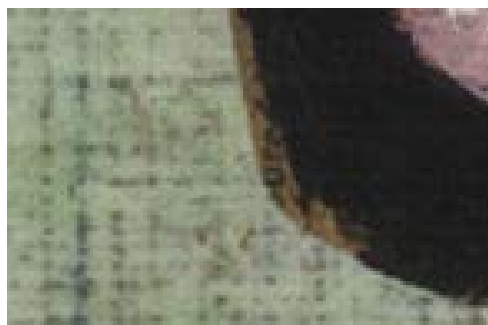
appears to 'lift' the pan. The relative 'lightness' of the hooked end of the K-L line is accentuated by the upward-oriented, empty semi-circle immediately above it (see figure 1), while the downward 'force' on it needed to achieve the counter-balance is in turn provided by the thick downward stroke of the 'K' diagonal line that cuts across the upper left-hand corner – a literal example of the 'compensating diagonal' outlined by Klee in his 'three rules of statics'.²⁴ Finally, the fulcrum, or centre of gravity, of the entire balancing act is once again the central black 'origin' point of the 'key sign' with which we began (figure 2). With this wonderful multidimensional abstraction of his prototypical signature-name, then, Klee also achieves a perfect simultaneity of formal and pictorial-gravitational balance – something he saw as a key compositional objective.²⁵

The Active "I"

'Along with the distant prototype the "I" is still present – the active "I", which enters into a relation with the prototype and sometimes brings in experiences gathered elsewhere. Something intrudes which, unless it is given artistic form, will perhaps be regarded as a foreign body. If the conflict between the prototype and the "I" is justified, we have an active process.'²⁶

As already noted, close inspection of the picture surface shows the configuration of black markings on newspaper to pre-date the application of paint, and that none of these markings, or their overall configuration, were modified in any way during the painting phase of the final composition. They may hence be analysed independently as a formal construction, as in the previous section, and the construction as a whole taken as initial thematic material for the final work. The juxtapositioning of painted elements (ground, motifs) may then be seen as 'illuminating', as it were, the 'pictorial writing' of the signature in a manner similar to Insular script (one of the many possible allusions of the painting's title, as discussed below).

To this end, Klee also made use of opportunities for ‘illumination’ afforded by the palimpsestic structure of the work. As K. Porter Aichele notes, like other twentieth century artists, Klee’s use of palimpsest was characterised by ‘a high degree of self-consciousness about the integration of process and meaning’ and calculated choices made about which fragments of underlying text were left visible, and their degree of legibility or ambiguity.²⁷ As is the case in *Insula dulcamara*, these choices include deliberate preservation of serendipitous co-occurrences of underlying text and overlay during the process of composition. Unlike Klee’s other palimpsestic works from 1938, such as *Alphabet I* and *Alphabet II*, or *Park near Lu*, the painted surface of *Insula dulcamara* almost entirely obscures the underlying newspaper print. However, there is one small but significant exception. On the left side of the lower, right-hand loop of the /ee/ line (figure 6), in a narrow space between the black paste and surrounding oil paint, is a fragment of vertically-oriented typeface that reads ‘(s)ure’ (figure 9). ‘Sure’ (in English, ‘Sura’) is the German transliteration of the Arabic term for a chapter or unit of revelation in the Qur’an, which at least one scholarly work of Klee’s time identifies as etymologically related to the Syriac word for ‘a writing’, or ‘lines’ in the sense of written verse.²⁸ As such, this tiny fragment of text both reinforces and comments upon the potential allusive relationship between markings in *Insula Dulcamara* and the Arabic-Qur’anic terms for reading and writing as noted earlier, thereby indexing the self-referentiality of the signature configuration as a whole.



[FIGURE 9 - Detail from *Insula dulcamara* showing fragment of newspaper text.]

Thus begins, or rather continues, the process by which aspects of Klee's 'active "I"' are brought into relationship with the original prototypical construction. In outlining his theory of pictorial form, Klee is keen 'to avoid the misconception that a work consists only of form', emphasising the pre-existent need which 'drives him [the artist] from inside to manifest his spirit in one place or another'.²⁹ For Klee, this 'drive from the inside', or 'active "I"', is constantly interacting with his ostensible pursuit of pure formal abstraction, and it is the need to find an aesthetic resolution of the dialectical tension this creates that forms the self-reflexive basis of his approach to composition. This is already evident in Klee's 'solution' to the signature configuration itself; its integration of Latin and Arabic script, standard and reversed-lettering, not only reflecting Klee's own ambidexterity, but also his ambivalent identification with both Europe and the Orient. As a consequence, interpretation of *Insula dulcamara* requires an *allusive* reading grounded in Klee's own approach to meaning-making and his psychobiographical circumstances at the time of its production. In this way, the act of interpretation becomes a continuation of the creative process initiated by Klee himself when making the painting; a process of imagining and exploring how and what elements (including the title) might *possibly* mean, or allude to, when offset against each other in various ways given a certain intentional stance towards their overall configuration.³⁰ Accordingly, the interpretation offered here derives from the following contextual considerations: (i) the fact that Klee was dying, and knew he was dying, from a progressive skin disorder at the time of painting; (ii) his tendency to adopt an attitude of mind, or mode of experiencing reality, characterised by self-reflexive identification with his environment; (iii) his life-long practice of using early diary entries as source material, or stimuli, for compositions, and; (iv) his practice of giving semantically rich, allusive titles to his works retrospectively, as acts of interpretation.

[FIGURE 10 – Paul Klee, *Ernste Mien*, ('Solemn countenance') 1939, 857; watercolour, tempera and pencil on primed paper on cardboard, 32.9 x 20.9 cm, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

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As is well known, *Insula dulcamara* was created in 1938 when Klee was living in Bern, less than two years before he died from heart failure brought on by scleroderma, a then incurable autoimmune condition in which the body's connective tissue, including skin and mucus membranes, gradually hardens, constricts and dries up. Much has been written about the influence of Klee's illness on his later work.³¹ In the case of *Insula dulcamara* this includes the painting's barely concealed allusion to (Klee's own) life and death,³² and connections made between the ashen-white 'face' of the central 'P' figure (figure 3a) and similar anthropomorphic images of death in other works of the period such as *Ernste Mein* ('Solemn Countenance') (1939) (figure 10) and *Tod und Feuer* ('Death and Fire') (1940).³³ However, while the pallor and texture of all such images allude to the effects of scleroderma on Klee's physical appearance, the latter may also find its reflection in the picture surface as a whole. Discussing Klee's illness and work from a psychoanalytic perspective, Marta Schneider Brody suggests that he (like other artists) conceived and/or experienced the work's support as analogous to skin, and that this relationship was most likely reflected in textural and/or other qualities of the picture surface.³⁴ Klee himself also described his works as a 'mirror image of the artist' in which "I' and the picture look each other in the face',³⁵ and in his diaries even records a waking identification with the picture surface:

'I dream of myself. I dream that I become my model. Projected self. Upon awakening, I realise the truth of it. I lie in a complicated position, but flat, attached to the linen surface. I am my style'.³⁶

The historical use of parchment also provides a material connection between skin and the support, particularly in the case of palimpsests. It is possible, then, that in *Insula Dulcamara* Klee may have consciously, or unconsciously, projected his worsening skin condition onto the picture plane, suggesting a very direct, almost tactile way in which his 'active 'I'' may have interacted with the prototypical basis of the work.

In addition to its potential relationship with Klee's skin, however, the painted surface of *Insula dulcamara* also clearly alludes to landscape and place. Throughout his life, Klee identified closely with two particular landscapes: that of the Thunersee in Switzerland, and 'Tunisie' in North Africa, as it was under French rule at the time of his visit in 1914. His life-long interest in the formal equivalence of pictorial plane and landscape resulted in numerous compositions abstracting or alluding to structural, figurative and tonal elements of these places. The semiotic opportunities, and potential fateful significance, afforded by the near-homonymic place-names also cannot have been lost on Klee, who not only delighted in word-play, but saw his life in essentially poetic, if not mythological terms and frequently experienced his self, mood and environment as symbiotically entwined.³⁷ Identification of self with landscape includes memory, and hence time, as a necessary dimension, and again numerous works by Klee explore aspects of these interrelationships. Similarly, the term palimpsest has come to refer to any object or landscape that in some way reveals traces of its own history, and is thus likewise connected with memory and the passage of time. As such, it seems reasonable to suppose that for Klee the textual content of the underlying newspaper chosen for *Insula dulcamara*, although now irretrievable, would have provided a salient

‘contextual ground’ for the overall composition,³⁸ having either autobiographical significance, as in works such as *Geist eines Briefes* (‘Letter Ghost’) (1937),³⁹ or more conceptual relevance as in works such as *Vorhaben* (‘Intention’) (1938). An example of the former might be a news article relating to Tunisia, say; an example of the latter, a page of obituaries. Consideration of such possible correspondences and aspects of Klee’s ‘active “I”’ at the time of composition, suggests that *Insula dulcamara* as a finished work may be read as Klee’s signature written (or tattooed) on a ground of skin-landscape-memory.

Klee is also known to have used (and even revised) his early diary entries as mnemonic material for compositions throughout his life, and other works of the period would suggest he was still doing so in 1938. It is hence conceivable that *Insula dulcamara* may likewise have been informed, directly or indirectly, by one or more specific ‘verbal images’ recorded therein.⁴⁰ While it has often been suggested that, like many other of his works, the painting’s Arabic-like calligraphy, plant motifs and colouring allude in a general way to Klee’s visit to Tunisia in April 1914, to date the imagery has not been linked to a specific event. However, in light of the above discussion, the following diary entry in which Klee records his impressions on his first night in Tunis suggests an intriguing possibility:

‘Heavy Sirocco wind, clouds, the extremely subtle definition of the colours ... To the rear, a big lake, which is said to dry up in the summer. A slight feeling of desert, threatening ... We walked a little. First into a park with very peculiar plantings. Green-yellow-terracotta ... Then we came upon a funeral. The lamenting women could be heard from a distance ... The coffin was coloured blue and gold. A carriage drawn by six mules ... No rain, and the weather was clear by evening.’⁴¹

It is easy to imagine how the older Klee, predisposed to fatalistic thinking, on re-reading or re-imagining this ‘threatening’ event and premonition of death in light of his scleroderma, might have thought it retrospectively prophetic. The cloud- and sky-reflecting lake of Tunisie, like his skin, was destined ‘to dry up’ completely, leaving a pink-white, salt-encrusted flat (figure 11a) contrasting strongly with the greens and blues of the Thunersee; a place which at first sighting on his return from Tunisia, Klee described as ‘sweet as a forget-me-not’ (figure 11b).⁴² Significantly, given the ‘*dulcamara*’ (‘bittersweet’) of the painting’s title, at the time of his visit in 1914 the salt-lakes of Tunis were fed by both freshwater and salt-water springs, and while the former were sweet-tasting and drinkable, and their water diverted for irrigation, the latter were (and are) responsible for large desiccated expanses of white crystalline salt deposits left as the water evaporates.⁴³ The contrasting lake-landscapes of Thunersee and Tunisie, and their inevitable transformation wrought by evaporation, then, offer a perfect etiological metaphor for Klee’s advancing scleroderma and its effects on his identity, suggesting an interpretation of the whitened, pastel-coloured ground of *Insula dulcamara* as Klee’s layered skin-landscape-memory (seemingly grounded in a specific psychobiographical event) that complements and illuminates the black markings of the signature configuration.



[FIGURE 11 - Contrasting landscapes of (a) Tunisian salt lake ©Ariane Bailey/UNESCO, and (b) the Thunersee in Switzerland (image taken by the author).]

The juxtapositioning of this skin-memory-landscape ground against the black signature markings highlights particular elements of the configuration in ways that accentuate the overall theme of Identity. Firstly, it ‘activates’ the three black signs along the upper edge of the painting in such a way that the ‘steamer’, by virtue of its location and orientation relative to the two semi-circular signs, alludes metaphorically to Klee’s life-course from birth to death. Trips by steamer figure prominently in Klee’s diaries, from numerous short crossings on the Thunersee to sea voyages including that to Tunisia. A large body of Klee’s work also relates more generally to the theme of orientation and navigation, and as Shelley Cordulack notes, early mariners’ reliance upon events such as sunrise, sunset and the falling of shadows to determine direction were of particular interest to him.⁴⁴ Signs such as those under discussion would thus have particular salience in this respect. Furthermore, that they may also be read as signifying Klee’s ‘life’, or ‘life trajectory’, is not only strengthened by their positioning relative to the rest of the signature configuration which, as noted earlier, encourages a horizontal left-to-right reading of his surname, but also by the fact that Klee has handwritten his name in faint minute letters in the top right-hand corner, just to the right of the inverted black semi-circle (figure 12). Given, as discussed above, the ‘steamer’ may also be read as a maddah in the Arabic grouping قُرْآ, it is perhaps salient that, as Jeffrey notes, the latter’s use in the Qur’an is restricted to revelation and includes ‘the Books of Fate men will have given them on the Day of Judgement’.⁴⁵ By virtue of such juxtapositions, then, as ‘pictorial writing’ these three signs (and indeed, the composition as a whole) ‘say’ “Klee”.



[FIGURE 12 - Detail from *Insula dulcamara* showing Klee's handwritten signature.]

A similar 'activation' occurs with the 'key' sign in figure 2, which as 'point of origin' serves not only a structural function as fulcrum of the signature-configuration, but assumes additional significance as the centre, or 'navel', of the composition-as-Klee. Klee devotes much space in his notebooks to points as 'cosmic seeds' of motion and the way to form. As he put it, 'when a point is given central value – this is the cosmogenetic moment. This event encompasses *the whole concept of beginning*'.⁴⁶ As such, he associated it with the navel, which he also equated with the 'centre of one's being' in a more inner, or spiritual sense, as in *Omphalo-centrischer Vortrag* ('Omphalo-Centric Lecture') (1939) painted around the same time as *Insula dulcamara*.⁴⁷ In addition to correspondences with birth and identity, the instrumental function of the sign in indicating rotational paths through the signature-name likewise acquires additional significance as an indicator of destiny, or life-course (i.e. 'Klee' as path). Klee's interest in celestial navigation necessarily involved knowledge of the apparent rotation of stars around the Pole Star, with the latter serving as a stationary point of reference from which to take one's bearings. As such, it is interesting to note that Klee would have been familiar with a diagram used by early mariners known as 'The Sky Clock', in which the Pole Star coincides with the navel of an encircled human figure with outstretched arms.⁴⁸ For Klee, then, as a navigational sign, figure 2 is likely to have evoked such microcosmic-macrocosmic correspondences, and to allude to both inner and outer

journeys through life. As Shelley Cordulack puts it, 'through the process of navigation, one can either head for the ends of the earth or the centre of one's being'.⁴⁹

The semiotic potentiation of the original black markings by the ground is complemented and extended by marks and motifs subsequently painted by Klee onto the ground itself. In terms of the painting's chronological 'way to form', these additional markings either augment or metonymically concretise what Klee saw as the emerging multidimensional simultaneity of meaning in the work as a whole in the act of creating it. Klee describes the process as follows:

'As the figure grows little by little before our eyes, an association of ideas may ... tempt us into an objective interpretation ... This acceptance and *formulation of the object* may suggest additions which can be put in necessary relation to it, objective motifs which, if the artist is fortunate, may fit into a slight gap in the formal structure as though they had belonged there to begin with.'⁵⁰

Examples of markings that augment aspects of the overall meaning include plant motifs, various oval markings akin to skin blemishes such as blood-spots, and numerous short, single brushstrokes of pure white paint. Of particular note, however, is a metonymic configuration of three red ovals located to the left of the 'key' sign (figure 13a), the form and location of which allude simultaneously to letter markings in Arabic script – most notably those of the initial /p/ in Klee's transliterated Christian name, **پل** - the red berries of *Solanum dulcamara* used in the treatment of scleroderma (figure 13b), and a clover leaf. 'Klee' is the German word for 'clover', and Klee made playful use of this pun as a rebus signature on several early drawings and other works (figure 13c). Positioning this sign in a 'gap in the formal structure' immediately adjacent to the 'Klee' of the configured signature, then, again amplifies the sound of the surname *and* affirms

the configuration itself *as* signature. Remarkably, the multi-layered significance of this action, and in particular its relationship with identity, is yet further enhanced by a strong possibility that the original three markings are actually Klee's thumb prints. As can be seen in figure 13d, close inspection shows what appears to be a whorl pattern beneath the thin overlay of red paint. As such, this single sign-gesture provides a beautiful example of Klee's conscious use of 'multidimensional simultaneity' to create, and/or encapsulate, a multifaceted concept, and serves to metonymically signify the meaning of *Insula dulcamara* as whole.



[FIGURE 13 - (a) Detail from *Insula dulcamara*; (b) Berries of *Solanum dulcamara* (detail) ©Smithsonian Institute; (c) Klee's 'clover leaf' signature - detail from Paul Klee, *Zwei Männer, einander in höherer Stellung vermutend, begegnen sich* ('Two men meet, each believing the other to be of higher rank') 1903, 5; etching, 11,7 x 22,4 cm, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern; and (d) enlarged detail of figure 13a.]

The key idea of desiccation and its connection with scleroderma is augmented by what would appear to be the final markings Klee added to the painting; numerous brushstrokes of white paint. While all red markings, including the oval 'heart' beneath the central 'P' figure, are ringed by white paint, suggesting desiccation of skin and

internal organs, the white brushstrokes are particularly dense on the 'face' of the 'P' figure itself, close proximity of which to the number '1' and the fact of being his initial, identify it as Klee's dying ego self (as distinct from the greater Self of the whole composition). As noted earlier, this figure is often associated with other paintings of the same period such as *Tod und Feuer* ('Death and Fire') (1940) and *Ernste Mein* ('Solemn Countenance') (1939), but while the ashen mask-like face, or skull, in each of the latter works bears clear visual resemblance to that of the central 'P' figure in *Insula dulcamara*, *Ernste Mein* (figure 10) is of particular interest as in it Klee constructs an image of himself as Charon on a boat to the underworld out of his initials, 'PK'; an example of what K. Porter Aichele terms an 'anthropomorphic monogram'.⁵¹ While Klee used his initials as thematic material in many compositions throughout his life, his predilection for word-play and the fact he was christened Ernst Paul, suggests that not only the image but also the title of the painting alludes to personal identification with death. As we have seen, the comparatively large signature on the painting also bears a particularly close resemblance to the 'K-L' in *Insula Dulcamara*. As such, this serves to underscore the metonymic significance of the 'P' figure in the latter work itself.

Title as Interpretation

Earlier it was suggested that for Klee, the creative process - and the act of interpretation, understood as a re-imagining of a work's 'way to form' - involves the exploration of how and what elements might *possibly* mean, or *could* allude to, given a particular intentional stance towards their overall configuration. In the passage from his notebooks quoted in the previous section, Klee refers to a moment, or phase, in this process in which 'an objective interpretation' suggests itself and the indeterminacy of the work is momentarily resolved, as it were, by a particular 'formulation of the object'. This formulation does not imply a simple one-dimensional definition, but a subtly

nuanced, multifaceted, unified concept that frames, or ‘makes sense’ of, the composition as a whole. To this end, Klee chose the titles of his works extremely carefully, preserving a ‘calculated ambiguity’, or presuppositional richness, that complemented and engaged with the work itself – indeed, was part of it. Klee’s titles, then, can be seen as acts of interpretation in themselves, offering further insight into how he as artist ‘made sense of’ the work.

It is often noted that Klee allegedly told Will Grohman that his working title for *Insula Dulcamara* was ‘Calypso’s Isle’ but had rejected it on grounds of it being ‘too obvious’.⁵² Numerous references to Homer exist in Klee’s diaries, and he is known to have undertaken an intensive re-reading of Greek Tragedies in the years leading up to his death.⁵³ An ironic heroic mythology, often with himself cast as sailor navigating uncharted waters,⁵⁴ also pervades his work, so it is not difficult to see the central pale-faced ‘P’ figure in *Insula dulcamara* as his dying ego-self awaiting release from the captive isle. Arguably, however, this fails to capture the full semiotic depth and ‘multidimensional simultaneity’ of the work as a whole.⁵⁵ By contrast, as a ‘formulation of the object’, the title ‘*Insula dulcamara*’ has multiple resonances with the signature-identity-death theme outlined above.

As is frequently observed, the title is a compound of the Latin for ‘island’ (*insula*), ‘sweet’ (*dulcis*), and ‘bitter’ (*amara*), suggesting ‘Bittersweet Isle’ as an approximate English translation. Given the idea of ‘island’ is common to Klee’s original and final title, we can assume it to be a key aspect of his ‘interpretation’, and at a pictorial level, as others have suggested, the steamer ‘out at sea’ certainly helps to configure the long ‘K-L’ line as an island coastline⁵⁶ with the ‘P’ figure standing in its centre. An ‘island’ is both a common metaphor for the self, and, as place of sojourn, an allegory for one’s terrestrial existence, so aside from Odysseus, it is worth noting that

Klee also felt affinity with characters such as Robinson Crusoe, of which novel he once wrote in his diaries 'This fiction and my reality touch at many points'.⁵⁷ The primitive statuesque appearance of the 'P' figure itself also evokes images of 'Easter Island', again thematically consistent in a word-associative sense given Klee's trip to Tunisia and many stays on the Thunersee occurred at Easter time, and the festival's connection with death and rebirth. That the 'island' is 'bittersweet' recalls the fact, as noted above, that the salt-lakes of Tunis are fed by both sweet-tasting freshwater and 'bitter' salt-water springs, again inviting connection with Tunisia, while characterising the nature of Klee's destiny or allotted time on Earth. However, simple translation of Klee's polysemic titles always runs the risk of reducing a total concept to a limiting definition and in so doing loses much of the multidimensional allusive subtlety of the original. The fact that the title *Insula dulcamara* is in Latin is itself therefore significant.

Firstly, given the 'pictorial writing' of the painting's focal signature-configuration, *Insula* invites allusion to the medieval 'Insular script' of illuminated manuscripts, characterised by letters hidden in and/or constitutive of complex geometric-pictorial designs,⁵⁸ the art of which is known to have influenced Klee and other early twentieth century artists.⁵⁹ Secondly, as is often observed, the form and content of the title allude to the botanical name *Solanum dulcamara*, a plant with small red berries used in the treatment of scleroderma. Thirdly, the Latin initials 'ID' are clearly related to the theme of 'identity' and self-referentiality; *Id* being the standard abbreviation for *idem*, 'the same', and ID more specifically referring to identity documentation such as passports. The latter would have been particularly salient for Klee at the time, as he had tried unsuccessfully to gain Swiss citizenship from 1933 up to his death in 1940.⁶⁰ Fourthly, and relatedly, in German, 'insulaner' ('islander') also has connotations of isolation or limited outlook. In discussing Klee's letters around the time of painting *Insula dulcamara*, Matthias Bärmann draws a direct thematic link between

Klee's illness and his sense of geographical displacement and alienation, noting his expression of 'a growing sense of timidity, the feeling of being doubly isolated, as someone both an immigrant and incurably ill ... being at once in exile and at home, a stranger in his own land – and even in his own body'.⁶¹ As such, this implies a certain self-reflexive irony in the title, suggesting once again that the 'bittersweet island' is Klee himself.

The title *Insula dulcamara*, then, has a rich semiotic field of interrelated meanings in many ways comparable to that created by consonantal roots in Arabic, the calligraphic script of which, as noted, is clearly referenced by the signature markings in the picture. Given the work's potential allusions to the Qur'an, as discussed above, we might also note the homonymic similarity between the Latin 'Insula' and the Arabic 'Insha'Allah' ('if God wills'), and its obvious thematic relevance for Klee in terms of accepting and submitting to his 'bittersweet' destiny.

Insula dulcamara and the death of the author

It is often claimed that Klee's art deliberately resists, or subverts, any attempt at providing a definitive interpretation of its meaning, or that such attempts are at best naïve inasmuch as they rely on outdated notions of authorial intentionality and ignore, or rhetorically downplay, the inevitable relativity and historicity of the interpretative context.⁶² The problem with this is that it fails to deal adequately with the nature of Klee's works as self-reflexive experiments in meaning-making itself; works that invite, provoke and even mirror the viewer's own active involvement in that meaning-making process, or what Klee termed the 'effort to make it visible'.⁶³ Like maps or diagrams, many of Klee's works have an intentional meaning that is intersubjectively recoverable, or renegotiable, once oriented to in a way concordant with the process of their original construction. This property does not, of course, preclude any number of alternative

idiosyncratic readings based on subjective associations of the viewer, but such readings generally fail to sustain or locate themselves within a coherent semantic field that encompasses the work *as a whole*; they remain fragmented views, not facets.

The issue of authorial intention versus 'reader-response' as valid bases for interpretation dominated late twentieth century critical theory in art and literature, so it is not without irony that Klee's *Insula Dulcamara* addresses issues at the heart of the so-called 'death of the author' debate.⁶⁴ While this possibility alone shows how a work may come to signify more than its author may have intended, as a reading it is still constrained by, or continues to develop, an original *intentional* meaning demonstrably recoverable from the work itself; with Klee at least, original meaning and potential signification are not separate or opposed positions, but stages in a unified, ongoing process of meaning-making.⁶⁵ Equally, as the above analysis demonstrates, this original 'intrinsic' meaning itself only becomes available through familiarity with 'extrinsic' theoretical writings and biographical details of its originator. Far from constituting an 'intentional fallacy',⁶⁶ awareness of the latter is arguably essential for orienting the viewer to perceive the signature-name-scales configuration of *Insula dulcamara* as an intrinsically self-affirming *gestalt*, much as a set of instructions or presupposed knowledge facilitate the reading of a diagram or map.

Asking what Klee's signature actually signifies, then, takes us to the heart of the 'Death of the Author' debate, and more specifically to the work of Jacques Derrida who by coincidence, like Klee, took the authorial signature as his focal point of analysis. Derrida usefully distinguishes three modalities of signature: (i) signature in the everyday sense of a particular form readable as the signer's proper name, written so as to authenticate an action, or product, in the name of the person who writes it (including variants such as rebus or metonymic signatures); (ii) 'the set of idiomatic marks that a

signer might leave by accident or intention in his product', constituting a recognisable 'style', and; (iii) a self-reflexive, or self-referential, modality in which 'the work of writing designates, describes, and inscribes itself as act (action and archive)'.⁶⁷ As with the writings of Francis Ponge, the 'subject' of Derrida's analysis, *Insula dulcamara* clearly exemplifies all three senses of signature in relation to Klee. The written signature and rebus 'clover leaf' authenticate the painting, and by association the life-death it depicts, as that of 'Paul Klee'; likewise, use of familiar motifs and colours render the work recognisably 'Klee' in terms of its style;⁶⁸ and simultaneously, in making the signature-configuration the *focus* of the composition and then *signing the signature*, the painting *identifies* itself and its act of production as 'Klee' himself and, by virtue of this self-referentiality, as signifying 'Identity'.

As signature, *Insula dulcamara* combines and alludes to both spatiotemporal and non-spatiotemporal aspects of identity; the contrast between the life-death trajectory of 'personality' in time, and the timeless 'I' of the present moment. Derrida captures something of this duality in the nuanced term '*maintenance*' (French: 'maintaining', 'nowing'). As he states; 'By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer. But ... the signature also marks and retains his having-been present in a past now or present which will remain a future now or present, thus in a general *maintenant*, in the transcendental form of presentness. That general *maintenance* is in some way inscribed, pinpointed in the always evident and singular present punctuality of the form of the signature'.⁶⁹ Elsewhere, Derrida describes *maintenance* as a 'Living Present' having 'the *phenomenological* sense of a *consciousness*' which in order for it to appear *as such* must be non-relative to any idea of past or future, including death.⁷⁰ The signature, then, as mark of identity, is an impossible self-referential object, an Uroborus, that erases the dichotomies of presence and absence, of atemporality and temporality. In *Insula dulcamara*, that which 'Paul

Klee's names – *identity*, in the complete sense of the word - is simultaneously here and not here, immanent yet absent; what Derrida terms an 'undecidable'.⁷¹

The paradox of signature as epitaph and presence, death and identity, finds its echo in another interpretative tradition associated with *Insula dulcamara*, in which the painting's central, skull-like 'P' figure in an otherwise idyllic landscape invokes the classical theme of *Et in arcadia ego*.⁷² Remarkably, whether consciously intended or not, aside from the thematic link between the two paintings, *Insula dulcamara* also bears a structural similarity to Poussin's *Les Bergers d'Arcadie* (1637-38) (figure 14); the elemental form and organisation of Klee's black markings around the central 'P' figure broadly corresponding to the formal geometry of Poussin's shepherds around the tomb as they inspect its famous Latin inscription.⁷³ Comparison of the two paintings shows the long K-L line to describe the contour of the leaning upper body, shoulders and outstretched arm of the shepherd standing on the left, and its extension out along the top of the tomb, over the shoulder and down the back of the shepherd on the right; the latter portion also coinciding with the vertical line of the female figure, itself marked by the two vertical bar lines on the right. The 'U' line, in conjunction with the hook of the 'L' on the K-L line, describes the form, or 'weight', of the female figure and the shepherd's pointing arm about the vertical, with the 'a' corresponding to the rock under the shepherd's foot. The capital 'L' describes the right-angle conjunction of the vertical and horizontal legs of the standing and kneeling shepherds on the left, respectively, while the undulating /ee/ line broadly corresponds to the kneeling shepherd on the left as he leans forward towards the tomb. The upward-pointing semi-circle on the top left corresponds to the light, 'morning' sky on the left, and the downward-pointing black semi-circle on the top right corresponds to the darkening, 'evening' sky on the right (the tonal contrast in Poussin's painting describing the passage of time, as do the inverse semi-circles in Klee's painting), while the 'paraph' line and 'stop' describe the receding

distance (again, the association with fate and death recalling the possible textual Arabic-Qur'anic allusion of these markings noted earlier). Finally, and significantly, the face of the central 'P' figure coincides with the inscription on the tomb that is the focus of the shepherds' attention. As such, the virtual 'overlay' of *Insula dulcamara* on *Les Bergers d'Arcadie* lends the former, once again, the quality of a palimpsest.



[FIGURE 14 - Nicolas Poussin, *Les Bergers d'Arcadie (Et in arcadia ego)* (1637-38); oil on canvas, 87 cm × 120 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.]

As Richard Verdi has noted, the fact that Poussin's painting with its inscription was subsequently reproduced in bass relief on his memorial monument in Rome also lends it a self-referential relationship with Poussin himself as 'author'; with the shepherds, as it were, discovering the tomb of their own creator.⁷⁴ The parallel with *Insula dulcamara* is again intriguing. Furthermore, as has often been observed, the construction of the phrase '*Et in arcadia ego*', like the title *Insula dulcamara*, is itself ambiguous, or multivalent, inasmuch as *ego*, 'I', may be read as referring to the occupant of the tomb, to death itself, the artist, or all simultaneously, suggesting yet another possible allusive dimension to Klee's choice of a multivalent *Latin* name for his painting.

In a contemporary context, then, *Insula dulcamara* signifies the perpetual 'death and return' of 'Klee' as author-artist. As Seán Burke says when discussing Beckett's 'The Unnameable': 'The 'I' that 'can't go on' is the subject of experience, the corporeal figure ... The 'I' that will 'go on' names the authorial repository which inherits from the deeds, the words and works of the experiencing subject ... the name of an author is properly construed as mark of originary absence'.⁷⁵ Although, as Derrida shows, the situation with respect to identity is more nuanced, or 'undecidable' than this, it is clearly the case that 'Paul Klee' does not simply signify the individual, biographical-biological, 'author' of *Insula dulcamara*, but a whole sociocultural-art-historical phenomenon. The irony, then, (if that is what it is) is that the painting itself, in addition to everything else it signifies as 'Klee', is now a self-referential example of that signed immortal legacy. Equally, it signifies the 'death' of the illusory idea of authorial intention as something personal and pre-figured, and a 'return' of the true 'Romantic' concept of intention as potentiating and transcendent; something Klee identified with as the source of creativity in both art and nature, which the artist submits to and helps to actualise, but does not 'own' or 'cause'.⁷⁶

Conclusion

'In summing up we may say: Something has been made visible which could not have been perceived without the effort to make it visible. Yes, you might see something, but you would have no exact knowledge of it.'⁷⁷

My intention in this paper has been to draw on Klee's own approach to the creation and interpretation of his art to create a coherent narrative reconstruction of how *Insula Dulcamara* as a complete composition, a total concept, may have come into being; what Klee termed its 'way to form'. This approach necessitates a more subtle take on authorial intention than that of ownership of an originating idea or a pre-

conceived plan, and positions the artist as 'discovering', or working out, a work's intention in the process of creating it. Klee was fascinated by the emergence of meaning through playful negotiation between the said and the unsaid, the contingent and the accidental, and its ambiguous yet revelatory character. Interpretation of his works, such as that put forward here, is essentially a palimpsestic elaboration and/or recapitulation of the same creative process by which they came into being. It involves seeing *how* the elements of a work, including its title, *might* allude to and link a range of concepts and ideas in ways one did not, and could not, necessarily foresee. For Klee, meaning-making is a self-reflexive discovery, a creative hermeneutic act. As such, the challenge of interpreting a painting like *Insula Dulcamara* is not so much the impossibility of 'knowing' which allusions were consciously intended or perceived by Klee himself and which not, or of misinterpreting or over-interpreting its content, but of maintaining a fidelity to the work and its interpretation as an organic integrated whole. Both Klee's experimentation with, and the viewer's encounter with, the 'openness of signification'⁷⁸ in his works is not at the expense of a 'formulation of the object', the total concept that embraces the whole, but rather the means by which it emerges, and it is the pursuit of this 'concept' – however elusive - that constitutes the process of reading responsibly.⁷⁹

As Klee understood, the potential meaning of any work of art is necessarily inexhaustible inasmuch as meaning-making itself is an open-ended, multidimensional, intentional activity that can never be fully realised in words, being subject to what Hirsch termed the '*provisionality*' of language and meaning.⁸⁰ As Klee himself put it:

'It is not easy to orient yourself in a whole that is made up of parts belonging to different dimensions. And nature is such a whole, just like art, its transformed reflection. It is hard to gain an overall view of such totality, whether it be nature or art, and it is still harder to communicate the view to

others. The answer lies in methods of handling spatial representation which lead to an image that is plastically clear. The difficulty lies in the temporal deficiency of language. For in language there is no way of seeing many dimensions at once ...'⁸¹

Language construes reality rather than describes it; it functions by way of indeterminate presupposition, not by reference to some nominally objective world 'beyond' itself. As such, it is impossible to say 'all' that is meant by what is said, as any 'saying' itself makes use of further presupposition.⁸² But equally, this 'deficiency' of language does not imply an arbitrariness of interpretation or an absence of intentionality. Rather, it highlights the necessity for direct experience (however mute) in apprehending the totality of that intention in all its multidimensional simultaneity.⁸³ While Klee fully exploited the semiotic potential of language for 'seeing many dimensions at once' through the multi-faceted titles given to his works, he clearly saw art as superior to language in its capacity to evoke such multidimensional experience. Moreover, his remarkable ability to perceive and cultivate the dynamic simultaneity of meanings and relationships within an evolving work-in-progress allowed him to create compositions that are intentionally ambiguous, yet with the 'effort to make it visible', also 'plastically clear' – qualities exemplified in his signature masterpiece, *Insula dulcamara*.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), xvi.

² For publications citing *Insula dulcamara*, see Paul-Klee-Stiftung, *Paul Klee: Catalogue Raisonné, vol.7 (1934-38)* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002): 420; a full bibliography, including more recent publications, is also available online from the Zentrum Paul Klee at <http://www.emuseum.zpk.org/eMuseumPlus>.

³ See for example, Constance Naubert-Riser, *Klee* (London: Studio Editions, 1988): 118-119; Susanna Partsch, *Paul Klee* (Koln: Taschen, 1990): 80-81.

⁴ For detailed analyses and discussion of Klee's self-reflexive 'narrative of process', see K Porter Aichele, *Paul Klee's Pictorial Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and K Porter Aichele, *Paul Klee, Poet/Painter*, (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2006).

⁵ Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye Vol. 1 of Paul Klee's Notebooks*, ed. Jürg Spiller, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 169.

⁶ Aichele, *Paul Klee, Poet/Painter*, 109.

⁷ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 432. This and subsequent quotations reprinted by permission of the Publishers.

⁸ While Standard Arabic does not distinguish between /b/ and /p/, Tunisian Arabic does (having absorbed many European words), with /p/ commonly represented as پ

⁹ Aichele, *Pictorial Writing*, 182.

¹⁰ Arguably, a tendency to celebrate the open-ended ambiguity of Klee's works at the expense of their underlying genesis may have unwittingly rendered 'the visible' somewhat 'invisible' in this respect.

¹¹ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 78.

¹² Arabic letters change shape according to whether they occur in isolation, or occupy initial, medial or final positions in a word. Hence: /k/ and /L/ in isolation, ك and ل, become كَل when combined with /k/ in initial position on the right.

¹³ Sara Lynn Henry, "Paul Klee's Pictorial Mechanics from Physics to the Picture Plane", *Pantheon* 47 (1989): 147-165.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ K.Porter Aichele, "Paul Klee and the Energetics-Atomistics Controversy", *Leonardo* 26:4 (1993): 309-315.

¹⁶ Paul Klee, *The Diaries of Paul Klee, 1898-1918*, ed. Felix Klee, (London: University of California Press, 1964), 175.

¹⁷ Interestingly, Hajo Düchting also reads the long horizontal ‘K-I’ line and ‘flourish’ as a single gesture, likening it to ‘the phrase line of a long melody ... resolved in a complex chord’, thus highlighting the connection between line and sound in the composition as a whole. Hajo Düchting, *Paul Klee: Painting Music*, (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1997): 86.

¹⁸ That the ‘steamer’ is in fact a ‘steamer’ is clear from Klee’s use of near-identical markings in other compositions such *Welthafen* (‘World Harbour’) (1933).

¹⁹ Arthur Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an* (Baroda; Oriental Institute, 1938): 232-233. This letter grouping occurs in the word ‘Qur’an’, قُرْآن, although Islamic scholars before and after Jeffrey’s time maintain that, being a Holy Name, the term Qur’an has no etymology.

²⁰ Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an*, 248-249.

²¹ For full discussion, see Henry, *Pantheon* 47.

²² Düchting, *Painting Music*, 86. Düchting describes these markings as bar lines ‘ordering the sequence of hieroglyphics’ in a manner analogous to sheet music.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Henry, *Pantheon* 47, 152.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 432.

²⁷ Aichele, *Paul Klee, Poet/Painter*, 110.

²⁸ Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an*, 181-182.

²⁹ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 99-100.

³⁰ For useful discussions of Klee’s study of ‘signifying potential’ as an approach to composition and reading, and its relationship with poetry, see Sarah Wyman, “How Paul Klee and Frank O’Hara used painted image and printed word to signify worlds in motion”, *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 26:1 (2010): 40-51; and Sarah Wyman, “The poem in the painting: Roman Jakobson and the pictorial language of Paul Klee”, *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 20:2 (2004): 138-154.

³¹ See Matthias Bärmann, “ “As if it concerned myself”: Emigration, Illness and the Creative Process in Paul Klee’s Last Years”, in *Paul Klee: Death and Fire, Fulfillment in the Late Work*, ed.

Matthias Bärnmann, Ernst Beyeler, Stefan Frey and Ulrich Krempel (Bern: Benteli Verlag, 2003), 10-23.

³² See Christian Geelhaar, "Et in Arcadia Ego — zu Paul Klee's 'Insula dulcamara.'" *Berner Kunstmitteilungen*, 118 (1970): 1-5. Geelhaar suggests that *Insula dulcamara* has an *Et in arcadia ego* theme, as addressed later in this essay.

³³ Naubert-Riser, *Klee*: 118-119

³⁴ Marta Schneider Brody, "Paul Klee: Art, Potential Space and the Transitional Process", *Psychoanalytic Review* (2001), 88(3): 369-392.

³⁵ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 57.

³⁶ Klee, *Diaries*, 426; 124. This and subsequent entries reprinted by permission of the Publishers.

³⁷ Many of Klee's diary entries illustrate this basic perspective. For example, on Easter Sunday in Tunisia, Klee famously wrote: 'The evening is deep inside me forever. Many a blond, northern moonrise, like a muted reflection, will softly remind me, and remind me again and again. It will be my bride, my alter ego. An incentive to find myself. I myself am the moonrise of the South.' Klee, *Diaries*, 926k; 290. Or again, 'Oh that one had become no more than a man – half lowly servant and only half god! A richly tragic, a profound destiny. May its full content take form some day and lie open before me like a document. Then I shall be able to face the black-empty moment calmly.' Klee, *Diaries*, 1116; 391.

³⁸ Aichele, *Paul Klee, Poet/Painter*, 111; 173.

³⁹ 'Letter Ghost' consists of an anthropomorphic envelope painted over newspaper print that includes advertisements for cigarettes and apartments, and references to train travel from Germany to Switzerland. See Holland Cotter, "The Gentle Art of Those Who Preserve Art", *The New York Times*, October 17th 1994: available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/17/arts/the-gentle-art-of-those-who-preserve-art.html>

⁴⁰ Aichele, *Pictorial Writing*, 105.

⁴¹ Klee, *Diaries*, 926f; 287-288.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 926u; 307.

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- ⁴³ *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed), vol.27. (New York: The Encyclopedia Britannica Company, 1911): 394
- ⁴⁴ Shelley Cordulack, "Navigating Klee", *Pantheon* 56 (1998): 141-153.
- ⁴⁵ Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, 233.
- ⁴⁶ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 22. Emphasis added.
- ⁴⁷ Cordulack, *Pantheon* 56.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 148. Cordulack reproduces an untitled drawing by Klee containing a semi-encircled figure similar to that in a sky clock.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.
- ⁵⁰ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 89-90.
- ⁵¹ Aichele, *Pictorial Writing*, 167.
- ⁵² Will Grohmann, *Paul Klee*, Trans. Norbert Guterman (New York; Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1967): 146.
- ⁵³ Bärmann, *Fulfillment in the Late Work*, 18.
- ⁵⁴ Cordulack, *Pantheon* 56.
- ⁵⁵ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 191.
- ⁵⁶ Robert Wernicke, "A riddle within a mystery inside an enigma: Klee", *Smithsonian Magazine*, Feb (1987), 65-75.
- ⁵⁷ Klee, *Diaries*, 1129; 404.
- ⁵⁸ See Ben C Tilghman, "The shape of the word: extralinguistic meaning in insular display lettering", *Word and Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 27, no.3 (2011): 292-308.
- ⁵⁹ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "The iconicity of script", *Word and Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 27, no.3 (2011): 249-261.
- ⁶⁰ Bärmann, *Fulfillment in the Late Work*, 10.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁶² See for example: Victoria Salley, "The Master Years 1917-1933", in *Paul Klee: Selected by Genius 1917-1933*, ed. Roland Doschka (London: Prestel Verlag, 2001), 13; Wernicke,

Smithsonian Magazine, 75; Jenny Anger, "How Many Klees Today?", *Revue d'Art Canadienne Canadian Art Review*, 18(1-2) (1991): 109. For an overview of philosophical positions on the role of intention in art, see Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). In common with Klee, Livingston concludes that 'Art-making is an intentional activity, even if it incorporates non-deliberative, unconscious, and spontaneous processes', 209.

⁶³ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 454.

⁶⁴ Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd Revised Ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

⁶⁵ As such, this is in agreement with Hirsch's reappraisal of his original distinction between meaning and significance after consideration of the provisional nature of language and meaning-making. As he states: '... different future fulfilments do not compromise the self-identity of the original intention. Many different future fulfilments can be said to belong to the same purpose, the same intention, the same meaning.' E. D. Hirsch Jr., "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted", *Critical Inquiry* 11:2 (1984): 202-225.

⁶⁶ William K. Wimsatt & Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, ed. William K. Wimsatt (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954): 3-18.

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): 52-54.

⁶⁸ As Klee observed in his diaries, 'I am my style'. Klee, *Diaries*, 425; 124. Similarly, K. Porter Aichele concludes: 'Klee's eclectic pictorial vocabulary is so uniquely his that it reads like a kind of visual signature, rendering its alphabetic counterpart all but redundant.' Aichele, *Paul Klee, Poet/Painter*, 175.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" in Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 1-23.

⁷⁰ Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: the basic problem of phenomenology* (Bloomington IN: University of Indiana Press, 2002), 128.

⁷¹ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 217. In Derrida's terms, 'an unnameable and neutral power, that is, undecidable, neither active nor passive, an an-identity that, *without doing anything*, invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it.'

⁷² Geelhaar, *Berner Kunst- mitteilungen*, 118.

⁷³ Klee lists Poussin as seen (albeit without comment) during a visit to the Louvre in 1906; Klee, *Diaries*, 645/49: 180. He was also familiar with Goethe's *Italian Journey*, the motto of which is *Et in arcadia ego*.

⁷⁴ Richard Verdi, "On the Critical Fortunes - And Misfortunes - Of Poussin's 'Arcadia'", *The Burlington Magazine*, 121 (1979): 95–107.

⁷⁵ Burke, *Death and Return of the Author*, 226.

⁷⁶ See Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London: Routledge, 2005). In addressing the popular misconception of the Romantic author-artist as autonomous creator, Bennett concludes, 'Romanticism itself does not simply involve the celebration of the originating autonomous genius, since it only does so within a context in which such a figure is at the same time subverted ... The Romantic author is, in a sense, a fiction of subsequent critical reception ... In this regard, in as much as the whole project of contemporary literary theory is often thought to be promulgated on the proposition of the 'death' of the (Romantic) author, it may be said to be chasing shadows, and may itself be a will-o'-the-wisp, a chimera.', 71.

⁷⁷ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 454.

⁷⁸ Wyman, *Word and Image* 26(1): 45.

⁷⁹ As Hirsch concluded: "Up to a point, responsible interpreters can adjust old concepts to new beliefs, so long as the adjustment is *in the spirit of the historical speech-intention* and is not greatly distant in character ... the original speech-intent subsumes new contents in the way that a concept subsumes examples, whether or not the examples were available to the original speaker.' Hirsch, *Critical Inquiry* 11(2): 223.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 222.

⁸¹ Klee, *The Thinking Eye*, 82.

⁸² John Shotter, "Dialogical Psychology" in *Rethinking Psychology*, ed. Jonathon Smith, Rom Harre, & Luk Van Langenhove (London: Sage, 1995): 160-178. As Shotter puts it, there are no 'extralinguistic 'somethings' in the world merely awaiting precise or accurate description. We use our rhetorical-responsive 'tools' of talk ... to clarify ... the space of further possibilities they [the 'tools' themselves] make available', 176.

⁸³ For a wonderful example of a detailed attempt at unravelling the puzzle-like multidimensional simultaneity of a single work by Klee, see K. Porter Aichele and Karel Citroen, "Correspondence art history, or writing the end of Paul Klee's *Anfang eines Gedichtes*", *Word and Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 23 no.3, (2007): 315-326.